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War Clouds Over the Horn of Africa

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

20 April 1973

WAR CLOUDS OVER THE HORN OF AFRICA

The chances of an armed conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia -- often the subject of rumor and speculation -- are greater now than at any time in the past decade. Both sides have moved troops to the long and ill-defined border and tensions are high. Neither Haile Selassie nor Somali President Siad appears to desire an escalation of the dispute but local commanders are less constrained and in the charged atmosphere a small incident could touch off actions which would be hard to stop or reverse. Though the locale is the remote wasteland of the Ogaden, and the forces involved are small, there are military and diplomatic interests of the US and the USSR in the background, and strong overtones of the Arab-Israeli quarrel. Hence, a conflict in this part of Africa would have fairly wide repercussions. This memorandum explores possible developments and in the concluding paragraphs assesses implications for US policy.

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The Emerging Crisis*

1. The dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia is fundamental and probably irreconcilable. At issue is control over the Ogaden, a large desert triangle in southern Ethiopia, flanked on two sides by Somali territory and inhabited almost entirely by Somali nomads. The Somali Government is committed to the political unification of all Somali lands and peoples and this commitment is accepted by most Somalis as an article of faith. As for Ethiopia, its national pride is at stake -- the Ogaden is part of the heritage of the revered Emperor Menelik. There is also a lively concern that if one portion of the multinational empire is lost, other peoples and provinces would break away. The discovery a few months ago of exploitable deposits of natural gas (and possibly petroleum) in the Ogaden introduces a strong economic factor. No Ethiopian Government could afford to cede the Ogaden, and no Somali Government could yield its irredentist claim.

2. Both sides assert that their military actions in the Ogaden are defensive in nature. The Ethiopians moved troop rein-

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forcements to the Ogaden in February and March because they feared that recent large military shipments from the USSR to Somalia were providing Mogadiscio with enough materiel to seize the Ogaden. Officials in Addis Ababa were also disturbed by the increasing assertiveness of Somali territorial claims, and by Somali efforts to engage the support of other African governments on the issue of the Ogaden. The movement of Somali reinforcements to the frontier followed closely after the Ethiopian deployments.

3. At this point each side probably has fielded about as large a force as can be sustained in the border areas (about 12,000 Ethiopians and 9,000 Somalis). Both armies are equipped with weapons mainly of Korean war vintage and are mechanized after a fashion. Neither force has the capability for swift, massive strikes or for sustained offensive drives. Each side has severe logistical problems, which cannot be resolved in the short run. If a shooting war broke out, it would be a confused, disorganized struggle with scenes reminiscent of Beau Geste or Lawrence of Arabia. Most informed opinion expects the Ethiopians to do better than the Somalis, but it would hardly be a conventional conflict.

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Prospects for Ethiopian Action

4. If Haile Selassie has his way, there will be no Ethiopian offensive military activity, at least not before the May meeting of the OAU. The aged Emperor has for long set his sights on the OAU's 10th anniversary celebration as one of his last hurrahs. It is to be the African social event of the year, or perhaps the decade, with virtually all Heads of State present. Haile Selassie's vanity has grown with age -- he treasures his peacemaker image and also has lingering aspirations for a Nobel Peace Prize.

5. Some, perhaps many, of the Ethiopian military leaders see the situation quite differently. All are conscious of the Emperor's advanced age (nearly 81) and the precarious health of the Crown Prince, now recuperating slowly from a stroke. The chances of a smooth transfer of power at the Emperor's death have been reduced by the Crown Prince's illness and probable residual disabilities. Many in the Ethiopian military believe that if the succession led to trouble and confusion in Ethiopia, the Somalis would try to seize the Ogaden. Hence, they see persuasive reasons for taking advantage of the assemblage

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of larger than normal Ethiopian forces in the Ogaden to crush the Somali army before more Soviet arms arrive and before the succession issue arises.

6. Ethiopian field commanders in the Ogaden are not likely to defy the orders of the Emperor by overtly invading Somalia. But the normal patrolling activities of both armies along the unmarked border are bound to produce further surprise encounters and perhaps some exchange of fire. If local commanders overreact, the situation could quickly get out of control or beyond the damping capabilities of the Emperor (or Siad). Moreover, some Ethiopian forward units have Israeli advisors who are skilled in desert warfare, and practitioners of deterrent and pre-emptive tactics. The chances of an escalating conflict will rise as time goes by, and as tempers fray in the harsh environment of the Ogaden.

Prospects for Somali Action

7. Somali commanders are conscious of their military inferiority in the border area, and are somewhat intimidated by the boldness of the Ethiopian deployments. Many Somalis view the Ethiopian moves into the Ogaden as part of a secret

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agreement with Israel and the US to crush Somalia. A good number of Somalis also believe that war with their larger neighbor is inevitable.

8. There are compelling reasons for the Somalis to take a cautious stance in the present crisis, aside from the military disadvantage. Over the past year greater amounts of Soviet hardware has been flowing into Somalia, mostly trucks, personnel carriers, artillery, and small arms, but also some anti-aircraft weapons and IL-28 light bombers. The Somalis have not absorbed all of this materiel or learned to use it effectively. They are just not ready for a major move against Ethiopia. Also there is widespread popular dissatisfaction among Somalis with the military government and with the Soviets, and some indication that morale is sagging in parts of the army. The regime would be unlikely to take aggressive action unless it felt that only a do-or-die military effort would keep it in office. Neither the regime nor the situation appear to be that desperate.

9. The Somalis still have hopes of gaining the Ogaden by non-military means. They expect to gather support at the May meeting of the OAU for their concept of self-determination, and

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believe that this idea will prove more appealing to fellow Africans than the rigid OAU dictum against changing African boundaries. They will argue that the border with Ethiopia has never been sanctioned by any international agreement, and is therefore different from other border problems. If this fails, Siad may even ask Haile Selassie once again to cede the Ogaden. Another scheme is to seek mediation of the dispute by some prestigious African ruler. None of these are likely to get very far, but the Somalis have been encouraged by Moslem Africans to make the most of the OAU meeting.

10. The Somalis have another option -- the instigation of guerrilla warfare in the Ogaden. About 175 Somali youths have returned from training in North Korea and are instructing and organizing other ethnic Somalis in camps along the border. From the Somali point of view, unleashing of the guerrillas would be a shade less risky than army probes into Ethiopia, and would offer the advantages of distracting the Ethiopian army and providing some publicity on the "oppressed Somalis" in the Ogaden. The event would be portrayed as an uprising of Ogaden natives, and Mogadiscio would probably not acknowledge its sponsorship. A development of this sort is more

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likely than a conventional attack across the border. It could be launched at any time, and if publicity is a major objective, a good time for it would be a week or so before the OAU meeting.

Options for the USSR and the US

11. The Soviets, in their role as the suppliers of military goods and the advisors to the Somali armed forces, have some capability to curb the Somalis but no influence in Ethiopia.* They are, indeed, urging the Somalis to take a peaceful course at this time. It would be in the Soviet interest to avoid a conflict in the Horn in which their client stood a good chance of being beaten. The Russians evidently are interested in retaining a favored position in Somalia. They have built their own naval communications facility and are working on an airfield near Berbera. This northern Somali port is used regularly by Soviet naval combatants. Although these are not large or expensive projects, they are important for supporting Soviet naval activity in the Indian Ocean, and for handling Soviet transport aircraft flights to Somalia. The

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quid pro quo for the Russian use of facilities in Somalia is the provision of military goods and training of the Somali armed forces. Hence, it is unlikely that the Soviets will reduce or cut off the arms flow, or diminish their military advisory presence.

12. The Somalis appear to view the Soviet rights and facilities as hostages to continued arms provision, and are confident that the Soviet interest in preserving the new bases is substantial enough to keep the arrangement going. Hence, this Somali Government is likely to be only moderately swayed by Soviet pressures in the direction of caution. To the extent that the Somalis are cautious, it is because they see their own interests best served by such a course. If Soviet arms deliveries continue for the next year or two at the present rate, the Somalis may come to believe that they have the offensive capability to make an effort to seize the disputed lands. Whenever the Somali Government decides the time is ripe for a grab at the Ogaden, it seems likely to act according to its own calculations, regardless of Soviet advice.

13. The US may be in a better position to influence the course of events in the Horn than is the USSR. Military aid from

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the US to Ethiopia [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] normally ranges from \$10 to 15 million a year, sufficient to provide modest supplies for the Ethiopian armed forces, but not enough to make these forces a first class establishment. Ethiopia is too poor to purchase large amounts of arms elsewhere. Even the deployment and maintenance of forces now in the Ogaden is a considerable additional strain on Ethiopian finances. In any protracted struggle with Somalia the Ethiopians would require greatly increased outside aid.

14. Haile Selassie is convinced that Soviet arms shipments to Somalia have upset the balance of military power in the Horn, and is anxious to come to Washington to make the case for more aid. His advisors are drawing up a shopping list which amounts to some \$122 million in new aid, and are producing other requests which would bring the sum up to \$200 million. Ethiopians normally exaggerate the scope of foreign threats and of their own needs. They have not yet allocated larger sums from their own treasury to the military, nor have they adopted an austerity policy at home. They do not really expect to get anything like \$200 million from the US, but they want some increment in aid, and are nervous about US willingness to back them in a crunch with Somalia.

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15. The US response to Ethiopia could have a major bearing on events in the Horn of Africa. If only a small amount of additional aid is provided, it would have some dampening effect on the ardor of the Ethiopian military, and the chances of Ethiopian offensive actions against Somalia would be reduced. Tensions would still be high, and the basic issue of the Ogaden would remain. Ethiopian field commanders might take aggressive actions on their own which would have the effect of escalating the conflict regardless of policies favored in Washington or Addis Ababa.

16. If the Ethiopians regard the Washington response as disappointing, they would have stronger doubt about their relationship with the US, and would explore other sources for arms. They would probably look first to France or the UK for some military items, and would try for grants or long-term credits. They might even explore the possibility of Chinese aid. The Soviets have often offered military aid to Ethiopia, and have suggested generous terms, but only on the basis of the expulsion of the US Haile Selassie and most of the military leadership do not trust the Russians or the Chinese, and would be unlikely to put fate of their country into such hands. Therefore, the prospects for arms from other sources are dim. The Ethiopians

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would probably conclude that they had no alternative to their close relationship with the US, but they would be resentful and angry about it. It is very hard to estimate how the Ethiopians would deal with the border problem in these circumstances.

17. If the Ethiopians were to receive a more generous grant from the US, they might interpret this as acquiescence in a more assertive policy towards Somalia, despite any accompanying warnings by US officials. If the Ethiopians were to become embroiled in a shooting war with Somalia, by accident or design, the chances are that they would rout Somali forces, but not try to assert control over the country. This would bring down the current Somali Government, but there is no guarantee that the successors would be more favorable to the West or that they would close down the Soviet bases. Some collection of Somali army officers would probably patch together a new government, which might or might not continue the arrangement with the Soviets. The new government would seek to rearm via Moscow or any other available source and would seek revenge at an opportune time, such as an Ethiopian succession crisis.

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